Forest Land Planning

Introduction

Forest land planning is the process by which the department converts the policies of the Forest Resource Plan to objectives and activities in the field. It is a dynamic and flexible process that is strongly affected by changes in information, regulatory requirements and economics.

The planning effort will begin by establishing clearly defined management objectives for specified landscapes (blocks of land). The department will develop these objectives for a range of activities, including timber harvesting and forest production, aquatic system and wildlife protection, road construction and maintenance, and other areas of public concern. Program guidance will come from the department's divisions in Olympia; the work will be done at seven regional offices. Information will be stored in the Geographic Information System. Managers will continually update and improve the plans to ensure they adapt to changing conditions.

The department's planning process is described in more detail below. The components included in this chapter — watersheds, riparian management zones, wetlands, wildlife, threatened and endangered species, access, and historical sites — will also be addressed by the department when it develops landscape-level objectives.

LANDSCAPE PLANNING POLICIES

No. 16: Landscape Planning

▼ **The department will develop plans by setting management objectives for timber and nontimber resources for specified landscapes consistent with the Forest Resource Plan.**

Discussion

Although forest land planning has been used in some form by the department since it was created, the intent of this policy is to establish a new, overall, standard planning format for the range of activities on state forest lands.

The department believes a dynamic planning process will better accommodate management needs, changing regulations and public concerns.The purpose of the new policy is to develop a pragmatic working tool for the professional forester that will show at any given time the department's plans for a particular landscape.

The new planning format will allow the department to translate the general policies of the Forest Resource Plan into specific activities in the field. The new format will also allow the department to evaluate harvest and multiple-use activities by considering them in context of a larger ecosystem (the landscape). This process permits the department to integrate the range of management needs (timber and nontimber) into its plans for a specific site.

The department will begin this process by establishing overall management objectives for a block of land based on a logical landscape, watershed or ecological unit. Landscape planning areas will likely range from a few hundred acres to several thousand acres. (Although the department does not intend to prepare landscape plans for small, isolated tracts of state forest land, the other policies listed in the Forest Resource Plan will apply to those areas and will guide department managers in deciding what activity is appropriate there.)

Several planning areas may be established within sustainable harvest units such as the Capitol State Forest or the proposed Olympic Experimental State Forest.

These management objectives for a given landscape will be prepared by the department's region offices.The objectives will reflect the policies of the Forest Resource Plan, public input, other department program goals and state regulations. The objectives will be in the form of a short, written statement, which will be made available to the public and department field personnel.

In preparing these management objectives, the department will encourage participation by interested parties from outside the agency. Staff professionals in the fields of fisheries, wildlife, soils, road engineering, hydrology, forestry, economics and others will be used to assist with planning. In some cases, interdisciplinary teams will be established to assist in analyzing the impact of multiple objectives.

Landscape-level planning will contain objectives for:

- Conducting silvicultural activities.
- Scheduling timber harvests.
- Protecting aquatic systems, including watersheds, riparian areas and wetlands.
- Providing wildlife habitat capability, including endangered or threatened species.
- Providing and maintaining an adequate road system.
- Other components addressed by the plan.

The next step in this process is to translate these landscape-level objectives into "operational plans" that consist of working maps which reflect the composite of the objectives for a particular landscape.

To accommodate the amount of information and deal with the dynamic nature of forest activities, the department intends to use its Geographic Information System (GIS) to store, retrieve and sort this data electronically. The GIS displays physical information, such as soil types, roads and wildlife habitat locations, on a computer-generated map. A series of overlapping layers of information allows easier access and simplifies revisions. Department managers will track landscape-wide and site-specific activities using the GIS, a flexible planning tool that has the capacity for frequent modifications.

The new planning format will allow the department to translate the general policies of the Forest Resource Plan into specific activities in the field.

The GIS system will eventually become the working tool of the field forester. (The department's goal is to document all planning on the GIS system, but it will take time to implement this system around the state. In the interim, some department personnel will rely on hand-produced maps based on aerial photographs or topographical surveys.) The field manager will revise the GIS inventory as additional information becomes available. By using this system, the department intends to develop a standard framework to provide easy updating, modifying, and monitoring; department personnel will have the ability to quickly integrate and receive multiple layers of information.

Information from the maps will be presented to the public as part of scheduled harvest or road reviews. In some areas, for example, the department may prepare an annual timber harvest plan for public review. In other areas, no timber harvesting may be scheduled for 10 or 20 years, in which case a harvest plan would not be prepared until later.

The public harvest review occurs when the department announces its proposed timber sale plan for a particular time period and location. A proposed time schedule and sequence is presented to the public at that time.

The next step is for the department's field personnel to develop a site-specific, silvicultural prescription (a plan of action). This process is triggered by a decision to conduct an activity on a particular unit or part of the landscape. The prescription provides a blueprint for conducting the activity. It selects the appropriate technique to implement the operational plans.

First consideration will be given to the management objectives for that landscape. The prescription will spell out an expected series of activities that begin prior to harvest. The prescription will also describe the harvest and reforestation method and the other silvicultural activities during the next 60 years or more that take the department back to a "mature" stand of trees ready for harvest.

The final step is the activity itself. The public, including neighboring landowners, will have an opportunity to comment before major activities take place.

The department will conduct a State Environmental Policy Act review when these plans or activities constitute a non-exempt agency action under the act.

The department will conduct compliance monitoring during and after the activity to ensure that the program staff at the Forest Land Management Division and the field staff (who prepare the operational plans) are given up-to-date information about the activities that have taken place. The department will then record and update its inventory as part of this process. In addition the department will periodically determine if landscape planning objectives are being met.

Figure 4 on pg. 32 describes this process in a flow chart.

The Department's Forest Land Planning Process

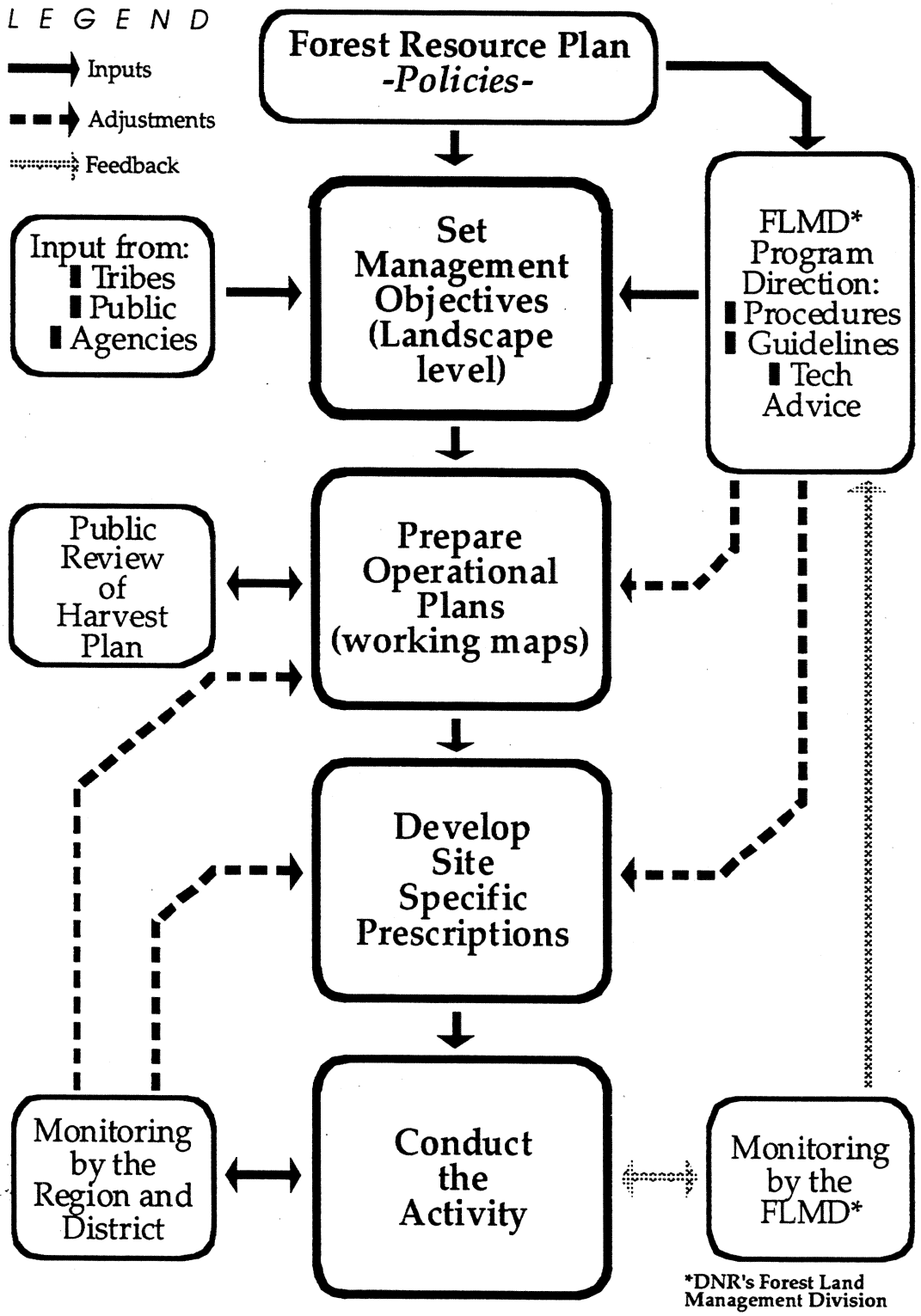

Figure 4: *The Department's Planning Process*

No. 17: Soliciting Information

▼ **The department will solicit comments from interested parties, including local neighborhoods, tribes and government agencies when preparing landscape-level objectives.**

Discussion

As part of the landscape-level planning effort, the department will consider information from public entities, tribes, adjacent landowners and other interested parties.

The department will attempt to integrate the plans of others so that state forest lands are managed in a comprehensive manner and environmental impacts are minimized.

The department will present its planned timber harvest schedules to the public at biannual reviews.

SEPA Policy

The State Environmental Policy Act requires state agencies to prepare an environmental impact statement for actions that may have a probable, significant adverse impact on the environment. The department intends to comply with SEPA and ensure timely analysis and mitigation of environmental impacts during its various activities, including project planning and implementation.

The department has two levels of responsibility in complying with SEPA. First, it must analyze its own general programs and policies; second, it must analyze its own site-specific activities at the field.

No. 18: SEPA Review

▼ **The department will conduct a SEPA review when subsequent plans and activities constitute a non-exempt agency action under the act.**

Discussion

The department will continue to review its plans and activities for compliance with SEPA. The review begins with this document, the Forest Resource Plan, and accompanying environmental impact statement.

The next level of SEPA review will occur when a proposed plan or individual activity, such as a timber sale, constitutes an action under the act. The department will consider the cumulative effects of past, present and proposed activities during the review. The department will perform this analysis by using an environmental checklist to determine the potential impact of certain site-specific activities and to assess whether the proposed action is non-significant or whether it will require additional study or modification (including an analysis of the impacts of past and present activities on adjacent land owners).

Checklists will be prepared on, among other things, the aerial application of herbicides, the aerial application of fertilizers and on all timber sales appraised at $100,000 or greater.

In case of timber sales, the checklist will describe the harvest areas, the location of roads and the impact, if any, that the activity will likely have on wildlife, aquatic systems and other natural resources.

Aquatic Systems Policies

The department intends to conserve and enhance the natural resources of state forest land while meeting trust obligations. Accomplishing this goal requires the department to integrate nontimber resource needs into its timber management activities. As part of this effort, the department will consider the effects of timber cutting and related activities, such as road construction, on three important aquatic systems: watersheds, riparian areas and wetlands.

No. 19: Watershed Analysis

▼ **The department will analyze by watershed the effects of past, present and reasonably foreseeable future activities on water quality and quantity, and it will modify operations to control risks to public resources and trust interests.**

Discussion

This policy requires the department to analyze the risk to public resources and trust interests from major activities within a watershed.

Because the condition of watersheds has a direct effect on water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, fisheries and other natural resources, the department will place more emphasis on analyzing the impact of its activities on watersheds. When public resources are damaged by activities anywhere in a watershed, the department's timber harvest plans may be at risk. For this reason, the department will analyze the condition of watersheds as part of its planning process.

The department will consider existing conditions on both state forest land and on adjacent properties that could impact management of trust assets.

The analysis will assess risks to public resources (such as, water, air, fish, wildlife and soil). The analysis will evaluate the probability and degree of detrimental effects to the public resource in question. If the risk is determined by the department to be unacceptable, the department will modify its operations. To reduce risk, the department may modify harvest methods, road construction techniques, road use, harvest unit size and distribution of harvest units. This analysis may exceed current requirements of the Forest Practice Act and will position the department to respond to and meet future regulations. (The analysis takes place in the context of Policy No. 16, Landscape Planning, pg. 30.)

As part of its analysis, the department will evaluate the aggregate effects of harvest activities on downstream flows. Specifically, it will examine the effects of timber harvests on stream flows, the timing of spring snowmelt and seasonal water yield.

The amount of department effort in this area will depend on the degree of risk to public resources and trust interests, as well as the amount, condition and distribution of department ownership. A small department ownership in a comparatively large watershed, for example, will probably not warrant special consideration. On the other hand, if the department manages extensive land or sizeable blocks of property in a major watershed, the department will likely apply the risk analysis described above.

In the past, the department has not conducted this type of watershed analysis and integrated it into its plans. The above policy thus represents a significant change.

The department intends to conserve and enhance the natural resources of state forest land while meeting trust obligations.

No. 20: Riparian Management Zones

▼ **The department will establish riparian management zones along Type 1-4 waters and when necessary along Type 5 waters. The department will focus its efforts on protecting key nontimber resources, such as water quality, fish, wildlife habitat and sensitive plant species.**

Discussion

A riparian management zone refers to the terrestrial environment bordering rivers and other bodies of water. It includes stream banks, plants, saturated soils and in some cases the adjacent, upslope land.

This area is important for wildlife and fish habitat and for protecting water quality. The zone is of variable width and is shaped to fit stream characteristics, land form and the resources of the particular site. Fish, a key natural resource, are of critical concern in riparian management zones. Most of the streams and lakes on state forest land support some species of salmon and trout. These fish need clean, cool water; spawning and rearing habitats; and woody debris for cover.

Some timber harvest activity will continue in riparian management zones. The department intends to remove timber from the zone only when adequate protection can be provided to fish and other nontimber resources. The policy requires the department to adapt harvesting patterns, types and methods to prevent degradation of the riparian environment. It expands the level of protection required by the department under the current Forest Practices Act regulations.

The Forest Practices Act classifies waters into five types. Type 1 refers to major navigable and fish-bearing waters (for example, the Skagit River). Type 5 refers to small waters, some of which may dry up for a portion of the year.

The department's current policy is only to establish riparian management zones along Types 1-3 waters and when necessary along Type 4 waters. The new policy requires the department to protect Types 1-4 waters. In addition, the department will protect Type 5 waters when necessary for water quality, fisheries habitat, stream banks, wildlife and other important elements of the aquatic system.